



*Create Community Connections*

## **Stop Rearranging Deck Chairs Building Sustainable "Mission Models" for the Arts**

### **Introduction**

My name is Doug Borwick.

I am an artist, trained and experienced as a composer.

I am an educator, for three decades I was a college professor teaching music composition and arts management. But most of all today, I am an advocate for community engagement, the work that I believe is the key to vibrant futures for arts organizations.

Over the past five to ten years, much discussion has taken place about the need for revised business models for the arts industry. On the expense side this comes from recognition of the labor cost challenges faced by the performing arts and the capital cost struggles of edifice-centered organizations (museums and, again, some performing arts institutions). On the revenue side it comes from shifting trends in philanthropy and public policy and from demographic and social changes impacting arts consumption.

While business models are important, the real issue that needs to be addressed is a deeper one. It may be that re-evaluating our "mission model" is even more critical than finding the right business model. Change—fundamental, mission-level change to a true focus on community, deep community engagement—is necessary for the survival of the arts industry as we know it today.

### **Systemic Challenges**

Δ This picture tells a story of change, radical change that threatens an industry. I live in a condominium in downtown Winston-Salem, NC. There are thirteen units. Only three of those units are occupied by people over 50 years of age. We are the three, the only three, that subscribe to any newspaper.

Δ Print journalism is facing existential danger. Printed newspapers, manually delivered to homes and businesses, are an increasingly costly product; the time lag in receipt of news between the moment of occurrence and delivery of the newspaper is “so Twentieth Century;” print advertising (print journalism’s primary source of income) is incapable of competing with the cost and flexibility of the Internet (where advertising and sales can be directly linked); and centralized, highly curated, corporate information sources are suspect in an era when authority is distrusted (a trend that had its beginnings in the 1960’s). The future of news reporting is online. Media companies, if they *can* survive, must transition to that reality.

Δ A generation ago libraries had to determine if they were primarily about books or information. Those that chose the former, as long as they survive, serve a valuable historical function but are few in number and not part of the social mainstream. Needless to say, their future is not one of growth and vitality.

Δ The immediacy and do-it-(all)-yourself nature of digital image capture has made film photography a distant memory for all but a handful of creators employing it for artistic purposes. Stuck too long in seeing photography as based in a particular product—film—rather than a “mission” of image capture and sharing neither Polaroid nor Kodak successfully navigated the rapids of that technological and social upheaval.

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Δ Business schools and “common knowledge” both tell stories of the crisis faced decades ago by “buggy whip manufacturers” with the advent and then the transportation victory of the automobile. As the horse and buggy faded from the scene, the need (and market) for buggy whips plummeted. The companies that remained totally or largely focused on that particular product gradually faded from the scene. Those that re-imagined themselves and transformed their business to meet the needs of the horseless carriage era survived.

The lesson for us is that awareness of major shifts in society is critical for any industry. That awareness must then inform an analysis of the core business (What is our *essential* purpose?) and retooling the product (or creating new ones) that respond to the changed circumstances.

Δ The world that gave birth to the arts many of us present and in which we are so personally invested has changed. The extreme concentrations of money and power that characterized the medieval and Renaissance church and later monarchies in Europe no longer exist. Patronage by individuals for both creation and production has gone the way of the dodo. Perhaps most importantly, labor is no longer inexpensive. The world of servants who made up the “downstairs” in British society of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century as depicted in *Upstairs, Downstairs* or *Downton Abbey*, was made possible by cheap labor. Those are historical times we will not see again. A labor-intensive arts industry is at risk due to today’s economic realities.

Δ The mid-twentieth century world in which our nonprofit arts industry was developed has also been transformed. We know that the quilt or the tossed salad is a far better metaphor for the U.S. than the melting pot. The upper class European roots of much of the repertoire of the arts establishment becomes less and less naturally relevant to the majority of the population as each year goes by. And the cost disease identified by Baumol and Bowen in the 1960’s (“It will always take four musicians to play a string quartet”), weighs us down. The model of dependence on a relatively small number of wealthy supporters (corporations, foundations, and individuals) will soon, where this is not already the case, not support the enterprise.

Δ Like libraries, print journalism, and film photography—not to mention buggy whip makers—it is time for the arts industry to reconsider its mission. There is no question that art will survive. The arts will always exist. Wherever there are human beings the arts will be there. It is far less clear that today’s arts organizations will survive through the next several generations.

## **The Disconnect**

But these structural concerns are not the only ones with which we must deal. There is a fundamental issue about the relationship between the arts and the community at large that is of even greater weight.

Δ Midway through my teaching career, the culture wars broke out a few blocks from my home in Winston-Salem at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. I soon realized that no politician paid any price for beating up on the arts and virtually no politician gained from supporting them. That began for me a long period of academic reflection.

### The Arts-Community Disconnect

Why was there, among the general public, so little support for the arts? Δ I believe the fundamental answer lies in the disconnect that has developed between the public and the arts themselves over the millennia since humanity began creating art together, in community: singing, dancing, story telling around a campfire, and, of course, painting on cave walls. Everyone participated in the arts. Everyone supported the arts. Δ Today, large percentages of the population view the work presented by the arts establishment as elitist and/or irrelevant. Δ What in the world happened?

As specialization of labor developed, people had resources to hire bakers, cobblers, and musicians rather than doing everything themselves. Artists then gravitated toward those who could afford to support them. (Artists are

not stupid!) Over time, with increasing concentrations of wealth, the interests of arts’ financial supporters naturally became more important than the expression of the whole community.

But here is a fundamental irony. Given that the arts originated as an expression of community, the fact that the arts today are in need of finding more and better ways to engage with their communities is astonishing.

### *The Chasm*

No one in this room needs to be convinced of the power of the arts. We are clear that the arts help build economies, improve education, and make our lives—individual and collective—better.

Δ If this is true, then why is the general public not beating down the doors of their local arts organizations seeking help and offering support? In spite of almost innumerable studies documenting the power of the arts, why do so many believe the arts have nothing to offer them?

When I interviewed Jonathan Katz, CEO of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, for my book, he framed the answer in a way that set me back on my heels. Δ He said:

*Neither professionals [or community leaders] in the relevant disciplines nor the general public put sufficient stock in . . . studies to alter policy. This disinclination to believe is rooted in unexamined assumptions that the arts do not touch the lives of more than a select few.*

Δ In other words, people do not believe the stories or the studies because they don’t believe they *can* be true. For many, the arts are so inconsequential, so void of impact on their own lives, *any* proof of their power is literally unbelievable. And there is what may be *the* central challenge for all of us here.

Δ And the disconnect is not diminishing. A graduating theatre student, child of Mexican immigrants, was speaking (in Spanish) with a stranger in a Latino grocery store. He was asked what he was studying.

“Theatre,” he replied.

“Like movies?”

“No, live theatre, on the stage.”

After a pause, the stranger asked, “Do they still do that?”

Δ But this disconnect is not simply between the public and the arts. It also runs the other way, between the arts and the public. In 2011, Robert Levine, principal violist of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra wrote in *Symphony* magazine:

*A few years ago my orchestra, the Milwaukee Symphony, was on tour in northern Wisconsin shortly after six teenagers were murdered in a mass shooting in the small town of Crandon. We were 50 miles away and we had a night off. Why didn’t it occur to anyone—staff, board, or musicians—that we could have done something remarkable by going to Crandon and playing a memorial concert? But no one thought of it, I doubt that more than a handful of American orchestras, or managers, or board members, or musicians, would have . . . . (27)*

We as an industry must learn to connect. We must come to matter more deeply in the lives of far more people, to engage with them in ways they find meaningful.

### **What Is Community Engagement?**

Δ This leads me, as—if I am going to be honest—most things do, to the topic of community engagement. Community engagement is the means by which we develop and expand those connections. In the arts industry, the word engagement has become a fad of late. That’s a good thing for someone who has written a book about

community engagement. It’s one of the reasons I’m here today. However, the lack of understanding of the word is so pervasive that we are in danger of losing the power that community engagement represents in the fog of meanings that surround it.

Δ If you will indulge me, or frankly even if you won’t, I need to wax professorial. In a workshop I would spend time differentiating among audience development, audience engagement, and community engagement. All are good, but they are not all the same thing. Since we are limited in time, let me simply present some definitions in an attempt to highlight the differences.

Δ **Audience Development** is a **marketing strategy** designed **for immediate results** (sales, donations, etc.). It is internally focused, what I call artcentric.

Δ In contrast, the word engagement implies relationship. **Audience Engagement** is a **marketing strategy** designed **for deepening relationships** with current stakeholders **and expanding reach** over time. Also internally focused (artcentric), it may result in new modes/venues of presentation and means of illuminating/explaining the arts to the public. Typically, “outreach” is an example of audience engagement.

Δ **Community Engagement** is a **mission strategy** designed **to create and maintain relationships** with individuals and communities (many of whom may not be currently affiliated with the organization). It is dependent upon establishment of trusting, mutually beneficial relationships over time—the arts and the community are equal partners. The focus of community engagement is on the relationship; **the art grows out of or is a response to the relationship**. The desired end results are deepened relationships and expanded reach for the arts organization *and* healthier, more vibrant communities.

### Examining Mission

Δ With that out of the way, let’s return to the issue of mission. In the Western world, since the time of the Church in the Middle Ages, the core purpose of the arts establishment has been to produce and/or present art. This worked as long as costs were low and support sources were sufficiently committed to the product to fund it. Today both sides of the equation have shifted so much that an existential threat exists for the industry.

With respect to resources, the key to the future lies in a dramatic increase in perceived public value. This will impact all potential institutional sources of support by increasing voter and stockholder understanding of the value of the arts. In addition, it will vastly expand the number of people interested in making personal contributions. But the path to this Nirvana runs through *being* valuable to people in ways far beyond continuing to do what we’ve always done.

### Art for Art’s Sake?

Δ Unfortunately, there is a truism many of us hold precious that makes pursuit of perceived public value difficult. “Art for art’s sake.” This is shorthand for art being important, art being meaningful. With that I wholeheartedly agree. However, for those who have not felt art’s power in their own lives, the notion is incomprehensible. It can be off-putting the way rabid sports fans can be intimidating to those not similarly minded.

Our attraction to the concept springs from appreciation of art as transcendent experience, but it has led some to lose sight of the fact that the arts provide transcendent *human* experience. The “art for art’s sake” mindset can imply that it is the *art* that is important. It is not. This perspective can also function as an excuse, conscious or not, for ignoring community.

Δ Think of it this way, **“Do we serve a what or a whom?”** Many of our mission statements are mostly or entirely focused on a what—the art that is the medium of our work. While serving art may be what’s in the front of our minds, doing so

1) is not at heart what many of us *really* want to do,

Most artists are invested in their work because they want other people to share the joy they experience in it. While this may look or feel like focus on the art, their core purpose grows out of the impact of that art on people.

And

2) is a pretty strange thing to do.

Divorced from art’s impact (or potential impact) on others, serving *art* is—let’s be frank—a kind of idolatry.

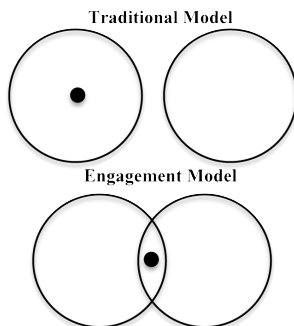
Fundamentally, there is no such thing as “art for art’s sake.” It is always for *someone’s* sake.

Δ Unfortunately, there is an impression some have that a community orientation demands a radical transformation of the arts enterprise to a social service role. Service at the expense of art is *not* what I advocate. *Any* work that proceeds from a self-understanding of responsibility in the community is good.



Δ In an attempt to clarify this visually, the extreme arts-focused (artcentric) position is presented on the left. An extreme “art is *only* service” perspective is on the right. (This is the use of the arts exclusively for community service ends.) Δ It is the broad middle ground—from just right of the left to just left of the right, where mutual interests (the arts’ and the community’s) are advanced—that is the focus of my work.

Arts Organizations/  
Artists      Community



Δ The graphic with the circles represents the shift I envision. Whereas typical practice has placed art (exclusively) at the center of the enterprise with the community on the periphery, the second image places the *relationship* between art and the community at the center. I would not propose eliminating mission statements about fostering an art form or forms. I would simply add a phrase like “improve lives through the arts” to our understanding of the practice. Acting on that would put us well on the way to substantive community engagement.

*Matter by Mattering*

Δ It is the arts’ marginalization from the broad public that is a principal hindrance to sustainability. We simply do not matter to many.

And how do we come to matter? At the risk of sounding cute, we will come to matter by mattering. Communities must recognize what we do as meaningful, important, even life-changing *to them*—collectively and/or individually. **To be seen that way, we must be and do things that make us so.**

**If we have to *tell* people that we matter, to them we clearly do not.** I have a dear friend who is a long-time, passionate, and tireless advocate for the arts, a lay person not an artist herself. I once heard her ask a panel of national arts leaders to “give us words” to use to convince legislators to support the arts. It was at that point I realized **it is not words that we need.** It is only actions we undertake, deeds we do in serving our communities that can move us past the fog of disbelief to a public awareness of the value we can add to civic life.

But coming to matter is rooted in what can be a new frame of reference, a new way of thinking about the arts-community relationship.

[Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,] the **Memphis Symphony Orchestra** “was in serious trouble. . . .”  
(27) . . . .

*For years, [it] had [provided] community-related services, such as family concerts, in-school*

*programs, and special performances. But although the MSO offered these services in earnest to enrich the landscape of the city, it was essentially a one-way street. The MSO did not know how to . . . be of Memphis in a way that . . . made people care if the orchestra lived or died. In the end the MSO leadership decided to confront the indifference of the Memphis community boldly and with a new sense of civic activism. It would no longer be a passive onlooker but an active stakeholder and participant in the city’s future. (27-28)*

In 2003, in his first meeting with Memphis’ mayor, the then-new President and CEO of the MSO, Ryan Fleur, “surprised everyone . . . . Instead of asking for help from the city, he asked the mayor how the orchestra could help him and the city of Memphis.”

The mayor very nearly fell out of his chair. No one in the arts had ever approached him that way before.

Striving to matter is important and it is a critical first step. But I now find myself wondering if simply mattering is enough. In an era of desperate needs and exponentially increasing competition for funding it may be that “simply” mattering will not suffice. To compete in the marketplace of public value, it may be that we need to make the arts indispensable.

Everyone who works in the arts industry believes, as an *a priori* truth, that the arts *are* indispensable, that there is no need to make them so. And that is true. The arts *are* indispensable. However, when “the arts” is thought of as synonymous with the organizations that comprise the arts industry as it exists today, it is demonstrably false in any objective sense.

Δ If you went out of business tomorrow, who would care?

- *Local/provincial elected officials*
- *School Board*
- *United Way*
- *Chamber of Commerce*
- *Your community's religious leaders*
- *Neighborhood associations*
- *Ethnic associations*
- *The general public*

**Any of them?**

Would there be outrage? Would there be lamentation? Would your community stand on the barricades offering support against threats to your existence?

Or would the person on the street even notice?

Δ To be viable in any long-term sense, we need to be viewed as essential, indispensable—not merely “nice.” As long as we are an amenity, as long as we are “nice” we will struggle to get the attention of a world that only has time for that which is understood as essential. When we engage, when we seek to serve the community good, we begin to gain traction as being necessary.

Community engagement, the means through which we come to matter, begins with a question. It is central and to some arts organizations it is a new question, “How can we serve the interests of our community?”

### **Community Engagement in Action**

Δ What does community engagement look like in practice? There are, of course, many examples. One highly visible one is the Trey McIntire Project. In 2008 choreographer Trey McIntire moved his contemporary dance company, the Trey McIntire Project to Boise, Idaho—350 miles northwest of here. In almost uncounted ways

TMP worked to be valuable to Boise: performing at Little League and college basketball games, community centers, the drive-in movie theater, and in flash mobs downtown. I am particularly taken with the company's relationship with the local bar where drinks were created and named for the company's dancers. Arts lovers in Boise found they could drink their way through the dancers! However, the substantive connections with the community were far deeper than that. They participated in monthly community (not arts) planning meetings with the football coach of the state university, the sheriff, and the CEO of an internet company. They brought city community development officers along on their international tours to create new economic opportunities in far-flung cities. These represented a real commitment to Boise. The payoff? Boise felt invested in the Project, even designating the company the city's cultural ambassadors to the world.

Now many of you know that Mr. McIntire recently announced that the Project is closing down. He and his dancers plan to pursue new opportunities. As a result this may sound like an out of date example. However, I find in it great hope. There is a reason Mr. McIntire called his company a Project. It was never intended to join the ranks of eternal dance companies. And, the response of Boise's citizens has demonstrated that they *cared*. Some lament the loss; others are clearly outraged or feel betrayed. A player in community life is leaving and the people of Boise are aware and have reactions. The Trey McIntire Project embedded itself in Boise to such an extent that the company shutting down matters, significantly, to the city.

Δ In another instance, the Memphis Symphony Orchestra this year announced that it was in serious financial trouble. Shutting down or radical restructuring as another entity were the options presented to the public. The jury is still out on the MSO, but civic leaders and community members have been rallying to support it. A recently completed Kickstarter campaign exceeded its goal by 15% receiving nearly 300 donations, most of which were in the \$50-100 range. In addition, local merchants are pitching in to help. The Downtown Hard Rock Café, not a top-of-mind supporter of things symphonic has sponsored a fundraiser and, to my mind, in a remarkable show of support, a vision services company, The Eyeware Gallery, is doing so as well.

The MSO's demonstrated dedication to its community may not be enough to save it. But in this case a partial response to my indispensability questions, "Who would care if you went out of business?" seems to be "a collection of unusual—or at least atypical—suspects."

### **Metamission/Mission Model for the Arts: Art *and* Service**

Δ We as an industry face challenges related to history and economics, as well social change unprecedented in human history. **The sustainable future for the arts lies in being, and being seen, as a player in everything that is of importance to the communities in which we live and work.** To develop the social, economic, and political support that will be required for survival arts organizations must learn how to work with members of their communities in exploring the meaning of the arts and the role they should play in all of our lives. It is in understanding ourselves as community builders that we can find the key to our future and fulfill the call that led us into this profession in the first place.

So as we attempt to re-imagine ourselves so as not to go the way of the photographic film, newspaper, or buggy whip industries, how can we frame our core mission? Δ **The fundamental "metamission" shift needs to be from focus on a product and its delivery to a focus on community** and how the arts can support it—a service orientation, one honoring the integrity of the art.

Simply put, **it's not "about" the art; it's about the arts' interaction with people** and how our art benefits them. While this may seem a radical break from current habits of thought about art in our industry, it is essential.

**We must seek more ways for our work to benefit larger segments of the public directly, especially those who are not now convinced that any significant benefits exist for them.** Fortunately, in practice this transformation need not be as world-shaking as some might fear.

## Arts Missions for the Twenty-first Century

### Overview

So going forward, *a* critical mission focus must become art as service to people. This is essential for institutional viability and vibrancy. But the point is “a” not “the.” The relative balance between focus on art and focus on people is a choice to make; however, so long as there is serious consideration of public benefit, successful engagement is possible. There is also a broad range of options with respect to the amount of energy spent on individuals and on communities (collections of individuals) and the types of involvement in the artistic enterprise provided. Every organization gets to (and should) choose the levels of each which best fit it, with the proviso that service, a broadened view of the community, and some new forms of participation are critical.

### The Core Business

If service is an aspect of the core purpose, what is the core business of arts organizations in the Twenty-first Century. By this is meant, what should the role of the arts be as seen by the people being served? In some senses, this is a marketing question. What is the product from the “consumer’s” point of view?

Δ **The arts industry is wrong in imagining its work to be product delivery.** Our product only has value in its impact upon people. As the environment becomes increasingly hostile to the health of that product, our focus must be on the people for whom art can and should have meaning . . . and on each organization’s relationship with them.

Δ **Our true core business is as experience providers,** experiences for those in the communities the arts institutions serve. Δ For those of us tending the mission-focused not-for-profit arts vineyards that means **experiences that foster personal growth or social bonding and bridging opportunities.** Δ These are experiences that serve the end of **improving lives through the arts.**

### **Yes, but . . .**

At this point some of you may want to begin working with new communities, others are ambivalent, still others are hiding your irritation or hostility (for that I thank you), and a few have nodded off to a well-deserved slumber.

Δ For those who are giving these ideas the benefit of the doubt, there is probably a fairly loud voice in your head saying, “Yes, but . . .”

Δ Yes, but my board . . .

Yes, but my donors . . .

Yes, but my members/subscribers . . .

Yes, but my volunteers . . .

Yes, but my artistic director . . .

Yes, but my executive director . . .

Yes, but my staff . . .

As compelling as arguments for more serious engagement are, it is entirely understandable that few of these current stakeholders race to embrace change. They are stakeholders because the way things are is important, even vital, to them. For staff, additionally, the daunting task of simply keeping the doors open makes the idea of change difficult to bear.

Still, every one of these groups has an investment in the health of the organization. The rationale for refocusing will have some traction for most. Providing reassurance that there will be continuity of programming and that adjustments will occur gradually is critical. (Indeed, adjustments *must* be gradual because building relationships with new communities takes time.) Acknowledging that the effort is designed to increase the size of the tent so more can take advantage of art can also be a compelling message. Most importantly, communication provides



the opportunity to inspire our current stakeholders about the benefits of this change for the future of art and of the organization as well as for the community.

## Conclusion

Δ Today, the arts to which we in this room are dedicated are simply not a vital fact of life for any but the truest of true believers. If it were otherwise, funding, attendance, perceived relevance, and visibility (to name a few issues) would not be the challenges they are.

Δ [Matter by Mattering] To become indispensable, we must first believe that engagement with our communities is important and understand that new ways of thinking and acting are necessary. If the status quo is unsatisfactory, change is required. To believe otherwise is magical thinking.

We must reimagine the nature of our work, understanding that we have to build relationships with external communities and to nurture those relationships through a balance, of our choice, between making great art and serving those communities.

Finally, we must commit to the training, adjustments, and activities necessary to *be* indispensable, acknowledging to ourselves that the process, like that of developing any relationship, takes time. This is a “for the long haul” enterprise.

The arts have much to offer and the benefits the arts represent are not now reaching nearly far enough into our communities. We as a society have invested much in an arts infrastructure that could and should be turned to a far broader public good. The arts and the communities in which they exist have inextricably connected mutual (and vital) interests. They represent for each other incredible potential for growth and enhanced vitality.

To achieve these ends, we in the arts should not see our communities as a collection of market segments to be tapped in an effort to sell tickets or extend “reach.” Communities are not resources to be exploited in the interest of furthering the health of the organization or even the arts as a sector. Δ It is from community that the arts developed and it is in serving communities that the arts will thrive. It is not the arts that are central here. It is the community.

The creation and support of healthy, vital communities will provide the justification for the expenditures of human and financial resources that the arts require. Communities do not exist to serve the arts; the arts exist to serve communities.